Miami's Oldest House: THE WAGNER HOMESTEAD

by Margot Ammidown

A MILE and a half up the Miami River, in Lummus Park, sits a wood-frame structure that looks incongruous in its current city setting. Over a hundred years ago, this house stood just a short distance from its present site in a startlingly different environment. There, off a branch of the Miami River known as Wagner Creek, in a wilderness unknown to most of the country, William Wagner built his home between 1855 and 1858.

William Wagner's daughter sold the homestead to a real estate company in the early 1900s and moved to downtown Miami with her family. Over the next decade Wagner's land was transformed into the suburban Highland Park. The Wagner House was moved squarely onto a residential lot, and its identity was soon submerged into a middle-class neighborhood streetscape of neat, nicely painted bungalows.

Many old-time residents were aware of the history of the house at 1145 NW 8th Avenue, so knowledge of its pioneer origin was never completely lost. Its existence was threatened, however. The plan for the northward extension of Dade County's Metrorail system cut right through Highland Park and meant that if Miami was going to retain its oldest known private residence, action would have to be taken. Dade Heritage Trust acted. In 1979, members acquired funds from the City of Miami's Community Development Block Grant Program and made plans for the relocation and restoration of the Wagner House.

Lummus Park was selected as the relocation site for a number of reasons. It was not far from the original site. Like the Wagner homestead, it was close to the Miami River. And the park contained another structure from the mid-nineteenth century, the Fort Dallas barracks, also known as the William English slave quarters.

The Wagner house was moved to the park and stabilized, and work was begun on its restoration and partial reconstruction. That process is still underway, but the house is now beginning to look like its former self. The restoration will be completed when period furnishings are collected and other displays are assembled. Eventually the Wagner house will be open to the public as the only example of a pioneer house from Miami's homesteading era, when South Florida was a remote frontier.

WILLIAM Wagner was an integral figure in that period in Dade County's past. The Wagner family were plain folk. William came to Miami in 1855, following his former military unit, which reopened Fort Dallas during the last Seminole War. He was a veteran of the Mexican War, fighting under General Winfield Scott until he was wounded in the battle of Cerro Gordo. He met and married his wife Eveline in Charleston, South Carolina, where he was sent to recover. The former Eveline DeBau (or Aimar, as she was also known) was a French Creol whose life in Charleston before William is a fascinating story on its own

William Wagner left most of hi family in South Carolina when he firs came to Miami. He established a su ler's store at the fort for the soldiers i residence, and up river, on land th later became his homestead, he bui a coontie mill and house. Wagner family joined him three years late The Wagners soon became popula figures in the small river communit They were honest, hard working, an hospitable by all accounts. They wer pillars of a settlement that was popu lated largely by transients, scoundrel or settlers who eventually gave up try ing to eke out a living from the sand pine flats and moved on.

Pioneer life in Miami was lace with many obstacles. Food, compan ionship, shelter – nothing came easil Hostile Indians were another worr The Wagners were among the firs settlers to make friends with men bers of the Seminole tribe who, du ing the mid-1800s, were hunte ruthlessly by a military seeking the

The Wagner Homestead, being restored by Dade Heritage Trust, recalls the pioneer era of Miami's past.